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ANNUAL ADDRESS OF THE CHAIRMAN OF THE NATIONAL CHILD LABOR COMMITTEE

FELIX ADLER,
New York City.

The National Child Labor Committee, which has been in existence for five years, and of whose work you will receive a full outline in the course of these sessions, is national, not only in scope, but in its distinctive aim. Its purpose, as I understand it, is to contribute toward the abolition of child labor and also, by means of its propaganda, to aid in infusing into the American people a new respect for the higher things in human nature.

I, for one, am startled by the fact that child labor should exist at all in the United States. No doubt it exists also in other countries, but one would have inferred, in view of the temper of the American people, of their generosity, their love for children, and their well-known benevolence, that it could not take root in this country. Why does it exist among a free and noble-spirited people? Why is it necessary that there should be state child labor committees and a National Child Labor Committee?

We are witnessing a tremendous tendency in the direction of exploitation in this country. It amounts almost to a fixed idea. We see Americans exploit the soil, ruthlessly exploit the timber, cutting down the forests on which depend the fertility of the land and the health of its inhabitants; we see the eager American exploit himself, make a physical wreck of himself, and transmit a debilitated constitution to his offspring; and in the same way we see Americans—in other respects a gentle-hearted and kindly people—exploit little children. Against the exploitation movement there has been started a conservation movement. The National Child Labor Committee is a part of this conservation movement. It has for its object to conserve the human resources, the best human assets of the nation—the health, the intelligence and the character of the children.

Perhaps you will permit me to indicate, in passing, why the exploitation tendency has become so perilously powerful. The

psychology of our national temperament should help us to an explanation. The American people are pre-eminently endowed on the side of the will, on the "motor side". They are a volitional people. Other nations, like the Greeks, Italians, etc., have been pre-eminently endowed on the intellectual and artistic side. The will among Americans expends itself chiefly upon external objects. The turn it takes is thus, in a peculiar sense, practical, leading to the multiplication of products and the vast accumulation of wealth. It would be, in my opinion, an error to suppose that the Americans are "chrematistic" and worshippers of the golden calf in the sense of prizing wealth above all other goods. No; what they seem to value is just the energizing, the free and successful venting of volition, and wealth is esteemed rather as the evidence than as the object of successful endeavor. The Puritans, who left so deep an imprint on the most progressive sections of the United States, are found to answer to the description of a people pre-eminently volitional. The Puritan faith has declined, but the Puritan set of the will has remained.

But, however, this may be, certain it is that the gospel of work in its narrow and unjustifiable sense has become the gospel of this country. What is called the "industrial spirit" is abroad in every so-called civilized land, but nowhere does it deploy itself with so little check as among us. Work for the sake of work is the watchword, and by work is meant increased production; and this is the idol to which we sacrifice the soil, the trees, our own health, and the children. We are hard toward them because we are hardened against every consideration which can check increase of production; because we are under a spell—we are ruled by a fixed idea. And this, to my thinking, is the real reason why it has been so difficult to secure the abolition of child labor despite the earnest interest of so many persons in this movement. This is the real reason why we find opposition in quarters where we should least expect it; why we not infrequently find that the so-called best men in the community, the men who are known as the pillars of charity in their neighborhoods, are the most obdurate adversaries of our cause. Business and sentiment, they think, must be kept distinct. Business requires increase of production; and since even a child's feeble strength, in connection with modern machinery, is capable of adding to the heap of products, it seems to them a kind of law of

nature that even the child should be drafted into the ranks of labor, no matter what the ulterior consequences may be.

Of course there are other arguments—I cannot help regarding them as rather pretexts than arguments—in favor of putting the burden of premature toil on the weak shoulders of the child. One argument used is that of the self-made man. He went to work, he tells us, when he was 10 or 11, and it did him no harm that he is aware of; on the contrary, it toughened him for the struggle of existence and enabled him to become the successful man he is. He forgets that so far as strength and power of endurance go he is probably exceptionally favored by nature and that hundreds of others would fail where he succeeded. He forgets, also, that so far as other qualities go, his lack of early education has probably injured him, and that, after all, successful as he may be in some respects, he may be quite a pitiable failure in other respects.

Another argument used is that the child's earnings are needed for the support of the family. This is met by the counter-argument that the competition of the child, doubtless, lowers the wages of the adult, and that the parasitic relation of parents feeding on the labor of their children is unnatural and repellent. But there is particularly one recent argument—one on which I must briefly say a word. It emanates from a man of national reputation, an eminent scientific investigator and one who is earnestly devoted to philanthropic aims. I refer to Dr. Stiles and his propaganda for the extirpation of the hookworm disease. If he is correctly reported, he maintains that the disease can better be controlled in the mills than on the farm; that the soil of the farm is polluted, and that co-operation of the mill-owners in conquering the dread disease is needed. I have asked our Dr. McKelway, who is acquainted with Southern conditions, to give you his opinion on this subject, and I will read you briefly from his letter:

“Dr. Stiles’ position, I think I can state clearly. It is that the soil-polluted tenant farms of the South and the rural schoolhouses and churches are at present centers of infection for the hookworm; that the factory villages have at least an elementary scheme of sanitation which renders soil pollution less easy; that the children of the cotton-mill villages can be more easily reached than the children of the farms through the co-operation of the mill owners, and that within the next five years nothing should be done by way of re-

strictive legislation to discourage the movement from the farms to the mills.

"I am in thorough sympathy, as, of course, everybody should be, with the efforts to eradicate the hookworm evil. On the other hand, my own opinion is, first, that Dr. Stiles has taken his position on the child labor question, consciously or unconsciously, in order to secure the co-operation of the mill authorities for his work; second, that the program of legislation which he advocates for the cotton-mill states, even if it should be reached within five years, would not affect in any considerable degree, the movement from the farms to the mills; that if it affected it in any way it would be in securing more families of workers for the mills in order to take the places vacated by the children whose labor should be prohibited. This might entail the payment of higher wages than are now paid in order to secure the necessary amount of labor, but that is the normal effect of taking child workers out of competition with their elders, and is something to be striven for, since the low standard of wages for the family encourages the hiring out of the younger members of the family.

"Granting that Dr. Stiles' percentages of the number of mill people infected with the hookworm, in some instances as high as 80 per cent., are correct, it seems to me that there is all the more reason for protecting the children whose bodies have been thus enfeebled, from the consequences of too early toil. Dr. Stiles does not distinguish between work in the mills and residence in the mill village, and it is not inherently necessary that the younger members of the family should work, for the family to remain in the mill village. Furthermore, I am certain from what Dr. Stiles told me of the rural regions he has investigated, with which I happen to be personally acquainted, that he has an unstable basis of fact for his conclusions concerning the South as a whole. I have no doubt from his description of the symptoms and peculiar appearance of the people infected, that I have seen cases of hookworm in the very regions of his investigation. They are parts of the sandy region of North Carolina and South Carolina, mainly. The soil is very poor and the people are poverty stricken. It did not seem to me that Dr. Stiles had any reasonable basis of fact for his assumption that a large percentage of the people of the mountain regions were infected with the hookworm. My own investigations for the past five summers

in the North Carolina mountains have convinced me that we have there about the healthiest race of people on the continent. I have no doubt that families can be found there affected with the disease, but the physical characteristics of the mountain people whom I have seen are exactly opposite those described by Dr. Stiles as indicating the presence of the hookworm. I think that Dr. Stiles' estimate of four to five million white people in the coastal, plain and mountain regions in the South, infected with the hookworm, is tremendously exaggerated."

It is regrettable that one kind of philanthropy should stand in the way of others. Why, in the attempt to achieve social benefit in one direction, should it be deemed necessary to thwart the efforts of those who are striving for social benefit in other ways? In the house of Philanthropy, as in the house of God, there are many mansions.

I wish to say this in conclusion: Our students of social history agree that the prolongation of infancy has been, perhaps, the chief instrument by which the human race became humanized. The finer organism requires time to develop, and the sacrifices which parents bring for the sake of their offspring have reacted on them and strengthened sympathy and all the kindlier feelings. Let us not throw away the instrumentality by which we have become human. Let us not abbreviate the period dedicated to child growth and culture. Let us give the child the chance to play, to get an education at school. Let us protect it, also, from the moral dangers that are the consequence of premature employment.

The question may be asked, Why should any one be especially interested in the child labor movement? I wish to tell the reason why I, for one, am especially interested in it, and the reason is not only because the thousands of children under 14 who are still employed in the mines and mills and in the canneries, and the children under 16 who do night work in the glass houses, appeal to my profoundest sympathy, because it seems to me an incredible outrage that these things should continue among a people like ours; but, in addition to this, because I hope that our interest in the child and what the child stands for will help to break the power of the fixed idea; will help to enlighten us so that we shall better see and appreciate, than, as a nation, we do now, that there are imponderable values that must be saved; that as a man does not live

by bread alone, so, also, does he not live by work alone, and especially by work of the kind that issues in the increase of material products; and so, perhaps, it will become true, as it was written of old, that "a little child shall lead them"—lead them all into the better and more human way of life.